

“The Grunt Padre: The Service and Sacrifice of Father Vincent Robert Capodanno, Vietnam 1966-1967” by Fr. Daniel L. Mode, 2000, CMJ Marian Publishers, Oak Lawn, Illinois

**Review written by
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My mother-in-law surprised me with a copy of "Grunt Padre" for Christmas. After reading about Chaplain Capodanno's dedication I can honestly say, Fr Mode's book was the best Christmas present I received this year.

Father Mode was a CCPO in 1989 when he was inspired by the story of Chaplain Capodanno as shared by the instructors at the Chaplains School. At the encouragement of other priests and Navy chaplains, he expanded a seminary thesis into the present book form, which covers in extensive, but easy-to-read, detail the story of one of only sixteen Navy chaplains who died in combat. I highly recommend this book as a must read for young chaplains. Father Capodanno's story provides an inspirational example of that keystone principle we teach in the Chaplain Corps known as ministry of presence.

Father Mode's book elucidates two key teaching points for young chaplains to contemplate. First, Chaplain Capodanno's life story teaches that the quality of one's ministry is determined by the quality of one's own spirituality. Father Mode takes several chapters to describe the spiritual journey of Father Capodanno's personal life before he focuses on Father Capodanno as the combat chaplain. His high-school years, his involvement with the missionary training of the Maryknolls which is an American Roman Catholic missionary society of priests, brothers and sisters headquartered in Maryknoll, New York, as well as his ministry in Taiwan, are all life experiences described by Father Mode as crucial in the development of Father Capodanno's personal spirituality as well as his attitude towards ministry. As you visualize the immediate events leading up to Father Capodanno's death on a Vietnamese battlefield in 1967, consider this quote from a 1958 Maryknoll textbook. “(The) final aim is to develop a priest who will possess sympathy for his people, a readiness to forget himself in helping them, courage in the face of obstacles, humility in success and confidence in spite of apparent failures.” Father Capodanno's act of sacrificial dedication on the battlefield is hailed today as “true heroism.” At the time, however, Chaplain Capodanno simply would have regarded it as “true ministry.” The point chaplains need to consider is simply this. We will not be able to follow Chaplain Capodanno's example of courage and commitment on the battlefield if we have not followed his example of spirituality prior to the battlefield.

The second lesson involves chaplain Capodanno's style of ministry as a chaplain. Early in his Vietnam tour, the Marines in his unit labeled him as the “Grunt Padre” because he totally immersed himself in their environment. To effectively minister to the Marines, he believed he had to be able to identify with them. That's not to say that he acted like, or wanted to be, a Marine. Mode provides dozens of anecdotes that describe the everyday ministry activities of Chaplain Capodanno. These stories illustrate that there was no confusion in the minds of the Marines as to his vocation; he was a servant of God. At the same time, however, he was somebody to which they could comfortably and confidently relate.

Reading the anecdotes about Chaplain Capodanno's daily routine provides excellent practical guidelines for those young chaplains assigned to combat units especially. How well a chaplain "connects" with the troops will determine the quality of his/her ministry among them. For example, the last place Chaplain Capodanno could be found in a firefight was the foxhole especially dug for him to use right outside his tent. Another example, given a choice, Chaplain Capodanno would accompany his troops to a hot combat zone rather than coordinate a community relations project. Mode's collection of Capodanno memories from people he ministered to and with gives today's chaplains practical benchmarks for their ministry amongst today's warriors.

"Grunt Padre" also describes the various memorials that have been erected in memory of Chaplain Capodanno's ministry, including a brief history of the USS Capodanno (FF1093). While these memorials focus on the tragic events of just one evening in September of 1967, Father Mode's book provides a memorial that describes the legacy of the entire life of a dedicated Navy chaplain.